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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the development of the junior high school and middle school concepts from the early 1900s to the post-World War II period. The nature of the middle school curriculum is also discussed. Meeting the needs of preadolescents appears to have been a major purpose in the establishment of the junior high school, though several factors prevented the junior high from meeting those needs successfully. The earlier maturation of each succeeding generation and renewed interest in the special character of preadolescent needs have led to demands for middle schools that can cater to younger students by providing them a place of their own and an appropriate curriculum. This curriculum caters to the social needs, demands for information about social behavior, and requirements for developing self-direction that are critical to the preadolescent. Curriculum reform efforts have taken two significantly different directions. One group of reformers argues for a return to basic, essential subject matter; another group urges acceptance of the ideas that the real curriculum is created through the day-to-day interaction among teachers and students, and that the curriculum must grow in response to the growth of the students themselves. (PGD)

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The Middle School Curriculum : A General Examination

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The Middle School Curriculum

This paper will be looking at the development of the middle school, from the inception of the junior high school at the turn of the century, to the emergence of the modern middle school after World War II. It shall also examine the curriculum needs, trends and issues that gave rise to the middle school in its current form. And, finally, it will look at some of the recent approaches to middle school curriculum, from "back-to-the-basics," to "curriculum-in-use."

"Historically, the development of the middle school can be traced to 1893 with the beginning of the junior high school organization of grade levels. This concept of intermediate grades was conceived by Charles W. Elliott..., who, in 1893 first formalized dissatisfaction with the grade level system at that time, grades 1 through 8, and 9 through 12. ....By the turn of the century, at the earliest, the idea of the junior high school had become popular. In 1910 this idea became a reality with the opening of the first two junior high schools in the nation, one in Columbus, Ohio, and the other in Berkeley, California." (Nazelrod, p.6)

Popper amends this view, citing Department of Housing and Urban Development, stating that, "Institution integrity was compromised in the American middle school during and after World War I when school districts used the middle school unit to get out from under a building-shortage problem. To this day, early adolescent education in the United States has not recovered from that tragic episode." (Popper, 551) This may shed light on some of the

criticisms of the junior high school which gained notice following World War II.

"The need for grade reorganization in the early 1900's was based on the judgment that the outmoded 8-4 system was unable to meet certain educational demands entrusted to it by society. In his book, the Emergent Middle School, (pp 45-46) Alexander lists several arguments for such a change to the 6-3-3 groupings. These include:

--differences in organization, subject matter emphasis and philosophy.

--the need to establish a school that could bridge the gap between the elementary and secondary levels in order to alleviate transitional problems.

--the differences in the social, educational and vocational needs between elementary and secondary students."

(Nazelrod, pp 6-7)

As Popper indicates, though, the establishment of separate schools for early adolescents may have been flawed from the outset, giving rise to early criticism." As early as the 1940's, however, following World War II, junior high schools were criticized for their failure to accomplish what they were created to do: to be an independent structure, with its own purposes and directions. Instead, critics called the junior high a 'mirror image of the senior high' (Stier, p. 2). In addition, as Howard (1968, p. 1) writes, those who condemned the junior high institution claimed that the reasons for which the junior high school started no longer existed, or were much changed. In fact, according to Lynch (p. 2), the junior high structure that had existed for so many years had several negative characteristics, some being:

--lack of special training needed for successful junior high teaching;

--little attention being given to certification requirements for this level;

--lack of prestige for the junior high schools and their teachers." (Nazelrod, pp 7-8)

Thus, the criticisms of that time appears to grow out of both the lack of understanding of the proper role of the junior high school and mixed motives for its rapid acceptance, and changing conditions in both society and the child. Nazelrod (p. 8) continues;

"Stier (p. 2) likewise indicates criticism of the junior high school by stating Alexander's (1968) arguments against the continuance of this system. In addition to the items named in Lynch's list, Alexander includes;

--likeness of interests and maturity of ninth grade students to senior high students;

--in flexibility and fragmentation of junior high school programs;

--records of ninth graders being included in four-year reports to colleges."

This was the thinking which gave rise to the modern middle school. Today, usually, we find that the ninth grade has been split off to join the high school, and either the middle school is comprised of sixth, seventh and eighth grades, or we have a 4-4-4 grade level plan (Alexander, p 541). Williams (p. 554) asserts that the middle schools are trying to get away from pressures of "too-early senior high type activities and the interscholastic

rat races" which plague many junior highs. Alexander (p. 540) holds that, due to the fact that children reach puberty earlier than they did fifty years ago (girls before 7th grade, boys before 9th) junior highs are being replaced by middle schools.

"The middle school, then, developed as the educational haven for the transescent, that child between 11 and 14 years of age, that child-in-change. Physical, emotional, psychological, and social changes are occurring simultaneously, creating a time of unpresedented flux. (Nazelrod, p. 9)

Popper (p. 546) puts it even more strongly. The early adolescent "comes apart at the psychological seam. Organismic disorganization, following Fritz Redl, and ego diffusion, following Erik Erikson, are concomitants of the psychological revolution at the onset of adolescence."

"...these pubescent teen-age years rank high as one of the most difficult growing periods in a person's life. Pre-adolescents and early adolescents find themselves to be part of a unique group as far as growth and development are concerned. A marked difference exists among and between these children in growth rate, height, weight, sexual maturation, and academic skills. Yet they also share commonalities of experiences, hopes, interests, egos, and relationships." (Nazelrod, p. 10)

To deal, then, with the special needs, concerns, urges, and problems of the transescent, for who the middle school was created, is one of the foremost considerations of the curriculum designer.

"If he (the middle school student) is to find significance in interaction with teachers and curriculum-diffuseness and affectivity have to be dominant in their relations with him, for his immediate need now is for the particularistic values of identifi-

cation. Otherwise his motivation in the learner's role will be difficult to attain. It is a period when he needs a temporary refuge from the pressures of culture, from the norms of specificity and affective-neutrality which are value compliments of the evaluative performance standard; a psychosocial moratorium as it were. But diffuseness and affectivity in the structure and process of school organization are dissonant values. Therefore, a special case has to be made by the school for this turn of events." (Popper, p. 547)

Bruner (p. 8) tells us that, "the construction of curricula proceeds in a world where changing social, cultural, and political conditions continually alter the surroundings and the goals of schools and their students." That is, that in the real world consideration of the student's growth and develipment must be tempered by the realities of political aims and misunderstood goals. He goes on to offer a distinction (Bruner, p. 6) "what Benjamin Franklin referred to as the 'useful' and the 'ornamental' ... the concept of useful in Franklin and in the American education idea afterward was twofold. It involved on the one hand, skills of a specific kind and, on the other, general understanding, to better enable one to deal with the affairs of life."

Therefore, an appropriate middle ground for the middle school must be found." The environment and programs of the middle school must differ in fundamental respects from the elementary and high schools. As Alexander writes in The Emergent Middle School (p. 12): 'Its facilities must be more varied and complex than the elementary schools, yet...not be as elaborate nor on the same scale as those of the high school. The atmosphere must be suited to the social

as well as the intellectual needs of the youngsters, providing more opportunity for social exchange than the lower school but setting more limits than an upper school. The total range of academic offerings should ...be more readily accessible to the youngsters than in a high school." (Nazelrod, p. 13)

Kindred (p. 51) offers that, "the factors that influence the design of (a middle) school curriculum are the same as those that influence (or should influence) curriculum design at any level of educational hierarchy. The differences lie in the complexity (of the needs) and maturity of the population to be served." To be more specific, Kindred (pp 52-53) states that, "3 essential components of curriculum design (are) objectives, content, and strategy and should be combined with scope, sequence, articulation and evaluation."

Williams (pp. 553-554) mentions a number of innovations which have been applied in the middle schools to meet the students needs for socialization, ready accessability to the full scope of the curriculum, and identity and security, these include: homeroom with block teaching and team teaching; units of special concern to young adolescents, including "encounter groups;" emphasis on self-direction and self-responsibility with independent study, alone or in small groups; team teaching; flexible scheduling; nongrading; programmed instruction; laboratory facilities; and new media such as closed-circuit television and computer teaching.

Alexander (p. 542) mentions the need to make the curriculum intellectually stimulating, with particular mention of specific skills, reading, viewing, listening, writing, interviewing, problem-solving, and basic subjects, language arts, mathematics,

science, social studies, and in some schools, fine arts, a second language and other electives.

Middle schools designing subject matter curricula...have utilized recent approaches within subject matter areas." ...The emphasis has been upon the structure of the (material.) Jerome Bruner...uses the term structure to mean the basic concepts, principles, generalizations, and the like that are peculiar to a specific discipline." (Kindred, p. 61)

A recent development in the field of curriculum design, or perhaps the field of curriculum criticism, is that of the back-to-the-basics movement.

Ausubel (1963, p. 8) gives us that, "increasing concern with the intellectual content and quality of the curriculum is being manifested in many different ways." Therefore, "a host of curriculum reform movements placing greater emphasis on the basic unifying principles of the various disciplines, on more efficient programming of subject matter, on consonance with recent advances in knowledge, and on adequate depth of coverage." Also, "the subject-matter preparation of teachers is receiving greater attention." Finally (Ausubel, 1963, p. 13), because of "...the phenomenal growth of the curriculum reform movements and of various forms of programmed instruction, leading educators are currently returning to the more traditional educational view that the content of the curriculum is the teacher's and not the student's responsibility."

Ausubel, et al (1978, p. 32) believe that "subject matter content of curriculum is being increased through such devices as longer school days and year, introduction of a foreign language

in middle school with advanced math and science and greater emphasis on homework."

Another view of curriculum is afforded by the work of Cornbleth, et al (p. 2), "studies of classroom curriculum processes typically view curriculum as a product produced outside the classroom and implemented inside the classrooms by teachers with varying degrees of enthusiasm and competence. An alternative conception of curriculum...is that curriculum is jointly, albeit not necessarily equally, negotiated by teachers and students as the interact overtime in particular classroom settings (see Waller, 1932; Woods, 1978, 1980). The curriculum is the socially constructed curriculum-in-use."

"Not only does social organization have academic effects and academic activity have social consequences, but the ongoing construction of the curriculum-in-use communicates normative messages including meanings of authority, responsibility, work, and success. Curriculum construction is a complex process involving the interplay of biographical, material, professional, institutional, sociocultural, and historical elements." (Cornbleth, et al, p. 3)

Whichever course we take in formulating specific curriculum recommendations for the middle school, several points are clear. The role of the middle school is to wean the student from the confining security of the elementary school, and prepare him for the greater diversity and responsibility of the high school. In doing so, note must be taken of the particular circumstances in which the early adolescent finds himself; in the midst of enormous changes which could overwhelm him. Political and social

movements can create forces which can have great influence in the middle school classroom or apathy which can work to its detriment.

"Even though skeptics...may express dissatisfaction with present curriculum developments, those less critical are able to see the middle school...curriculum as perhaps it truly is: a curriculum like the transescent -- in the process of becoming." (Nazelrod, p. 24)

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